DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 379 215 SP 035 700

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TITLE Portfolio Practices in the Composition Classroom: A Study Conducted at University of Missouri-Kansas City.
PUB DATE [94]
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College English; English Departments; English Instruction; Evaluation Methods; Higher Education; *Portfolio Assessment; Portfolios (Background Materials); *Student Evaluation; *Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS *University of Missouri Kansas City

ABSTRACT

The use of portfolio assessment by composition instructors in the Department of English at the University of Missouri-Kansas City is described. Based on a survey of instructors, conducted in the spring of 1994, the paper examines: (1) who determines what goes into the portfolio, (2) how students are assessed throughout the term, (3) features looked for when reviewing student papers, (4) frequency of student conferences, (5) grading techniques, (6) differences in teaching or in student responses due to use of portfolios, and (7) advantages and disadvantages of portfolio assessment. The teachers felt that students became less dependent on the teacher and more self-reliant about writing. Advantages included students not worrying about grades, teachers seeing improvements in students' work, students taking responsibility for their own work, and students applying what they have learned. Disadvantages included the paperload at the end of the semester, students not knowing how they are progressing during the semester, the chance that teachers may evade their responsibility to evaluate students' work throughout the term, and the worry teachers have that they may be accused of grade inflation. (JDD)

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ED 379 215

Portfolio Practices in the Composition Classroom

A Study Conducted at
University of Missouri-Kansas City

edited and compiled by
Pat Huyett

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The following study was conducted in the Spring of 1994 in an attempt to find out how our composition instructors use portfolios. Our purpose was to share ideas and information with one another and to encourage those who had not used portfolios to give this practice a try.

Currently, we do not have a program-wide portfolio assessment program in the Department of English. But we see encouraging instructors to use portfolios as first step in making such a program a possibility for the future.

Who determines what goes into the portfolio?

When we began to discuss this issue, we entered the sticky area of defining exactly what constitutes a portfolio. I had defined it as a set of papers students work on during the semester, then turn in revised at the end, representing their best work. But is it a portfolio if students have no choice in the contents?

Many of the teachers I surveyed require that all assigned papers go into the portfolio. Some teachers want to give student more choice. A couple of teachers have students write several response papers throughout the term--perhaps as many as thirty. Of these, a student chooses to expand and develop three or four into longer essays.

Some teachers want students to turn in all drafts of an assignment in a final portfolio. Some want to see only final drafts.

How do you assess students throughout the term? Do you give a mid-term grade? Do you tell students if they're doing below average work so they can drop?

I was surprised at the variety of responses. Many teachers felt that to give grades other than at the end of the semester defeats the purpose of the portfolio because it gets students thinking in terms of grades before the

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instructor wants them to. Others felt that students needed to know more about "where they stand" in the class.

A couple of teachers give a grade on the third draft after extensive peer review and revision sessions. Some teachers still give quizzes on reading material. A couple of teachers gave preliminary grades which could change after revision. Or without putting a grade on the paper, an instructor may in conference tell a student how a paper would be evaluated at a given stage. Many teachers give formative responses to papers which are often evaluative but without the grade. Many teachers have an open door policy--if you want a grade on any piece, the teacher will give it to you at any time.

Many of us have conferences for each paper turned in and give both written and oral response to student papers. We also have practice "grading" sessions in class with sample papers using our department's grading standards printed in our own handbook. During conference, if a student broaches the subject of grades, you can pull out the English Departments "Grading Standards" rubric which describes and A, B, C, D, and F paper, then go over the rubric together and try to determine if a given description applies to the student's paper. This also helps to counter student criticism that grading is a purely subjective process.

A few teachers collect a midterm portfolio which they assign a grade. These are generally accompanied by a midterm conference to inform the student of the teacher's perception of their progress.

Almost everyone interviewed let students know if their work was below average so they could drop. Or told students that unless they heard otherwise, they could assume they were making at least a "C" for the course.

Assuming you reserve grades for midterm of semester's end, what sorts of things do you look for when go over student papers? Generally, how do you mark papers? Do you combine student conferences with written comments? How often do you schedule conferences during the semester?

Many of our teachers use the department's grading standards in some way, usually by having students apply the standards to sample papers as previously described, as well as using them to evaluate papers students give them. The grading standards are broken down into the following four areas:

1) Central Idea/Thesis/Focus/Purpose
2) Organization/Logic/Arrangement

3) Development/Support/Evidence
4) Application of Language/Style/Standard Usage

A couple of teachers also spend considerable class time going over what will be expected on a given assignment--talking with students about what might need to be stressed for each paper.

Most teachers look to see if a student is making a point and how well he or she is making that point. Some teachers like to mark what they see as "problem areas" in a paper. Or they'll point out a pattern of error they think the student should work on. As well as marginal notes, teachers generally make comments at the end of the paper, summarizing their reactions. Personally, I find I ask a students lots of questions on a draft, because as a rule, I find they haven't developed their ideas enough. Most teachers feel it's also important to include something positive in their comments about a paper, no matter how bad it is.

All of our teachers schedule conferences at least once during the semester and some schedule them up to three or four times throughout the term. Some of us spoke with Don Murray a couple of years ago when we invited him to consult with us. He told us he doesn't mark papers at all--he relies totally on student conferences. One of my colleagues does this now. But when I tried it, I found it was difficult for me to remember what to say to a student if I didn't write a few comments. So I've come full-circle--and in my experience, students <u>want</u> you to write something on a paper so they don't feel empty handed when they leave your office. Some teachers combine these techniques--respond in writing to one draft, give oral responses to another.

Most of us use peer response workshops on early drafts. Often this is an initial "rough draft workshop" where students are asked to respond to Toby Fulwiler's questions--
"What did you find vivid or interesting?"
and
"What did you want to know more about? Where did you need more information?"
After a week, students are asked to do a more involved response--usually the teacher provides a form with specific questions about the draft for a student to fill out and give their peer.

One of our teachers responds to each draft during the semester with a form she's made up, "Student/Teacher Draft Response" which begins their dialogue which continues for each draft. She also uses a Progress Report

Form where she keeps track of how many drafts a student has given her. whether they took part in peer evaluation, whether the draft was on time, and a few brief comments about the paper.

When you do grade the portfolio at the end of the semester, do you give each paper a grade, or do you give one grade for the portfolio?

Our teachers do it both ways. Generally the portfolio counts somewhere between 60% and 80% of the final course grade. Other factors which determine a course grade include journal, class attendance, Writing Lab attendance, and class participation (which may include having drafts on time for workshops).

Dan Mahala, former director of composition wrote, "When I do grade the portfolios at the end I'm usually not surprised. (There are some exceptions!) I read the clean copy of the student's best work (say, twenty pages) straight through, consider the distance they've traversed to culminate their inquiry into this text, and give a portfolio grade. Other factors too, like participation and attendance, count in the final grade. After I've given a portfolio a grade and a final grade, I'll write a response justifying them, if the student requested one. It's curious to me that I almost never change the grade as a result of having to articulate reasons for it."

What differences in your teaching or student responses have you noticed in using portfolios as opposed to grading /returning/ averaging student papers?

Most teachers felt students became less dependent on the teacher and more self-reliant about writing. Teachers like giving students more responsibility for their work.

Our colleague Micky Dyer wrote, "I think my students learn that writing is a process. They learn what strengths they have as opposed to all of the weaknesses they have heard before, they learn to read more effectively because we practice it all semester. My teaching has changed because they learn to use me as their user-friendly sources of writing information instead of The Evaluator. Perhaps I give them more hope about their writing because I don't evaluate it right away. I also involve them in the process more because they are responsible for their writing as well as a self-evaluation of their portfolio...In English 305, for future teachers, I do 'mock' grade the first paper to show them how I evaluate by the grading standards.

This allows us to talk about the grading system and how students feel about not getting one. They are allowed to keep the grade or rewrite all semester."

Portfolios make me feel as if I'm more of a coach and less of a judge. Students do have some anxiety about grades, but they also feel as though they have more chances to "get it right." I don't mark papers to justify grades any more--and I feel i have more invested in their work, too. I try to look at their papers as a concerned reader. The exciting thing about portfolios is I can actually see the progress they're making--students can set realistic goals for themselves and I can help them with that progress.

The portfolio system challenges students to recognize the complexity of reader responses, and not reduce them to a single number, according to Dan Mahala. "How many times does a student give me a paper that I think is better than previous work in some ways, but worse in others? I think most of the students feel the delay in grades gives them more space to take some risks, to play with language and ideas, to tolerate the uncertainty generated by feedback. Most of the students want me to guide them, and I do. But, in the past, as soon as I would tie my 'guidance' to a number on a single scale, I would find them phasing out, or reacting as if I'd just given marching orders: 'I could find a more provocative angle, Mr. M. if only you'll tell me what you want.' I don't want to play this role, and when students cast me in it, I resist."

Briefly describe what you see as the disadvantages of portfolio assessment in the college composition class.

Micky Dyer, who has headed up the Greater Kansas City Writing Project at our campus, articulated my feelings when she wrote, "Three-quarters of the way through the semester, you believe you have failed each of your students (teacher panic) and it is too late to change the system. The progress report and self-evaluation help eliminate the burden of grading everything at the end, but there are still several drafts to read through." I have often felt this way when teaching a composition course. Sometimes, no amount of prodding will make a student revise. Sometimes students never go beyond making superficial revision.

There are always going to be students who think their work is better than you do--no matter how much you go over your rubric or department's grading standards. You can't make students revise if they don't want to. But ultimately, out there in the real world, they're going to have to be their

own editors, so that's a choice they make. Anyway, most students do take advantage of the opportunity to revise their papers and rethink their ideas.

Many teachers complain about the paperload at the end of the semester, especially if they write out a justification of the grade they give or if they feel they are still involved in the discussion of a student's work on a paper. Some teachers have eliminated lengthy written evaluations at the end of the term--the burden lightens if you make no comments at the end.

It was also felt by a number of our staff that teachers need to be careful not to keep students in the dark about their progress during the semester. Danny Reardon who supervises our teaching assistants warned, "We can often send students 'the wrong signals' if we don't let them know how they're doing in class overall."

Dan Mahala added, "The main danger I see in the portfolio system is that teachers can, if they are uncomfortable with their authority as teachers, evade their responsibility to guide and evaluate the students' work throughout the term. Especially beginning teachers, I think, can avoid dealing with how they feel about their role as evaluator, so that when they are finally compelled to address this issue late in the semester, their actual responses are not at all what they or their students had thought." Teaching assistants at UMKC are not allowed to use portfolios the first semester they teach.

Some of us are also frankly worried that we may be accused of grade inflation because with portfolios, you may find you're grading higher. This is a legitimate concern for us in the University of Missouri system--one of our curators once suggested students should be ranked in order of excellence in classes--an obvious challenge to teachers perceived to inflate grades.

Luckily, faculty have been able to prevent this ranking, but the concern remains. It may be argued that with portfolios students will work harder and rightfully earn the grades they receive.

What are the advantages?

Students can quit worrying about grades all the time. Maureen Maginn, supervisor of our Macintosh Lab wrote, "Students write more during the semester [and] get to exercise judgment. The teacher can see development of the students' judgment over the course of the semester." It's gratifying to see students' work improve--and most do.

Students have more of a chance to apply what they've learned throughout the semester. They learn to take responsibility for their own work and are allowed to work at their own pace and in their own way. Micky Dyer sees "greater student involvement in writing and critical thinking and reading, and greater focus on writing a a process--not lip-service, we really do it--we don't ignore evaluation, but we don't let it control us; I like to think my students write more for themselves or their peers and not for me..."